DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 171 TM 035 066

AUTHOR	Deemer, Sandra; McCotter, Suzanne; Smith, Nancy
TITLE	Sharing the Responsibility: A University-School District Investigation of Middle School Transition.
PUB DATE	2003-04-00
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *College School Cooperation; Intervention; *Middle School Students; Middle Schools; *Student Attitudes; Transitional Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*Transition Time

ABSTRACT

A collaborative study was conducted to investigate students' perceptions of their learning environments in elementary and middle school and to suggest interventions that would aid the school district in creating developmentally appropriate practices at the secondary level as the students experience the transition into middle school. Data were collected from student, teacher, and school leader interviews and through surveys and observations. This study focuses on the responses of elementary and middle school students to surveys and interviews about their perceptions and experiences in the middle school transition. Surveys were administered to 350 sixth graders and 368 seventh graders, and interviews were conducted with 10 seventh graders. Approximately 20% of the students reported difficulty with the transition to middle school. Four themes emerged from the responses. Students felt disconnected from school in grades 6 and 7. They perceived middle school work to be more difficult, and they often felt victimized in their school settings. The fourth theme was that parents did not seem to be heavily involved in schooling in these grades. Findings suggest that the problems may have more to do with struggles faced by students who do not have strong academic profiles than with just making the transition to middle school. An appendix contains the interview questions. (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 478 171

Sharing the Responsibility:

A University-School District Investigation of Middle School Transition

Sandra Deemer

Suzanne McCotter

Nancy Smith

Millersville University of Pennsylvania

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S. Deemer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

TM035066

Paper discussion presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April 2003.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Purpose

Recent work in middle school education has provided direction for best instructional and organizational practices to meet the needs of early adolescents (e.g., Jackson & Davis, 2000). Although our collective work in implementing such practices has begun, we have not yet integrated these practices throughout the middle school environment and met the needs of all youth as they transition to and from the middle school environment.

Much research has documented that students' positive self-perceptions related to learning and motivation often decline while psychological difficulties (e.g., depressive symptoms, school truancy) often increase during adolescence (see Midgley, Middleton, Gheen, & Kumar, 2002, for a review of studies). These findings have alarmed many constituencies, including university researchers, parents, teachers, and school administrators, leading them to investigate what factors may contribute to the decrease in positive self-perceptions and the increase in negative affect and behavior during adolescence. The purpose of this collaborative study between university faculty, student researchers, and school district personnel was to 1) investigate students' perceptions regarding their learning environments in elementary and middle school and 2) suggest interventions that would aid the district in creating developmentally appropriate practices at the secondary level, particularly as students transition into the middle school environment.

Theoretical Framework

According to Eccles and her colleagues (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993), the negative changes in self-perceptions, affect, and behavior can be explained by the lack of fit or "developmental mismatch" between adolescent needs and the opportunities afforded them by their academic environments. This claim, based on stage-environment fit theory, suggests that healthy development results when changes in individual needs align with changes in

opportunities within the environment. For most adolescents, this alignment occurs and healthy development results throughout the elementary and secondary levels of schooling; however, somewhere between 25% and 50% of adolescents do not experience this alignment and are at great risk for educational and social difficulties (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995).

Much evidence exists showing that students who are at risk for difficulties begin to manifest negative self-perceptions, affect, and behavior after the transition from elementary to secondary levels of schooling (see Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000 for a review). Compared to elementary environments, secondary environments (i.e., middle schools, junior high schools, and high schools) are typically characterized as less motivating learning environments. In both observational and survey research, students have reported that instruction is less interesting, management is more authoritarian, and relationships are more distant in these environments (Midgley, Middleton, Gheen, & Kumar, 2002). In addition, parent involvement often decreases during the transition from middle to high school (Epstein 1995; 1996).

It is important to consider why secondary schools, particularly middle schools, might have these characteristics. Several sources have suggested that the size and bureaucratic nature of secondary schools limit their effectiveness (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995). Specifically, lack of connection to the community, departmentalized teaching, ability grouping, normative grading, and large student load can undermine the motivation of both teachers and students. The negative stereotypes surrounding adolescents that exist in our society also may exacerbate the problems experienced by students in secondary schools (Eccles et al., 1993).

In order to create developmentally appropriate environments for all students, constituencies must work together to understand and respond to adolescents' needs. Guidelines suggested by Jackson and Davis in *Turning Points 2000* contribute notions of creating small learning communities within schools and involving parents and other community members, but do not specifically address the perceived needs of students as they move from one environment to another. In this study, we used stage-environment fit theory to guide us in an investigation of students' perceptions of elementary and secondary learning environments and in the design of interventions to align students' needs with opportunities in their environments.

Methodology and Data Sources

The original impetus for this study came from a local school district whose administrators approached us for advice and assistance in gathering and analyzing data on the issue of middle school transition. This district, located in a suburban area in the northeast, contains a largely Caucasian student and teacher population and enrolls 5319 students. Within this district, there are seven elementary schools (K-6), two middle schools (7-8), and one high school (9-12).

Once the scope of the study was determined, the investigation became the focus of a graduate-level *Research Methods* course. Working in collaboration with district administrators, teachers, and university professors, the students in this course aided in the design and analysis of both survey and interview protocols. Data for the project were collected through student, teacher, and school leader interviews; student, teacher, and parent questionnaires; and observations in elementary and middle school classrooms. In this proposal, we focus on elementary and middle school students' responses to surveys and interview questions regarding their perceptions and experiences before and after they transition to middle schools in this district.

Survey and interview questions were created by reviewing existing literature on middle school transition and identifying issues that have been found to concern students as they make the transition from elementary to middle school. Surveys were administered to sixth (n = 350) and seventh (n = 368) graders during their regularly scheduled homeroom in the spring of the academic year; it took approximately 20 minutes for students to complete the 18-item survey. In order to gain more insight about why students have difficulty making the transition from elementary to middle school learning environments, teachers in the middle schools were asked to identify students who they believed were having trouble making the transition. Ten students in seventh grade (5 female; 5 male) were identified and asked a series of questions about their experiences in school prior to and after making the transition to middle school. Examples of questions that assessed students' perceptions and experiences in both 6th and 7th grade can be found in Appendix A. All interviews were conducted by a graduate student in the *Research Methods* course who was trained by one of the faculty researchers on the team. Each interview was videotaped and occurred during the school day, lasting for approximately one hour. After transcribing each interview to identify patterns in students' perceptions regarding their experiences, themes were identified.

Results, Limitations, and Conclusions

Descriptive analyses of survey data demonstrated that, although the needs of many students were being met, there was a substantial number of students who felt as though they were neither succeeding in school, nor had the support systems necessary to succeed. Chi-square analyses indicated that a significant number of students felt successful in management of their academic workload, were familiar with assignments and respective due dates, and felt comfortable in their grade level. However, there was a minority of students who perceived a lack of fit in those

areas. Although not a statistically significant finding, there is a practical significance for addressing the concerns of anywhere from 10% to 20% of students who perceive themselves as struggling in these areas. Specifically, these students reported having difficulty remembering their schedule, being prepared for class, using their locker, and completing homework.

It was those struggling students on whom we focused during the follow-up interviews. Four themes emerged from the interview responses. First, all of the students reported feeling disconnected from school during both sixth and seventh grade. Specifically, they reported that they did not have anyone to talk with in school if they had a problem, and they did not feel comfortable joining extracurricular activities offered by the school. Interestingly, all students indicated liking their teachers better in sixth grade than in seventh grade; however, they did not characterize this person as one whom they would seek out if they had a problem involving an issue that was not academic in nature. The students reported that it was more difficult to make friends in the middle school because of the sheer number of unfamiliar students.

The second theme evident in the students' responses was that they perceived the work in middle school to be more difficult than what they had experienced in elementary school. They indicated that their teachers had less time to help them when they were struggling and that they were motivated to avoid getting in trouble rather than being motivated to achieve. In fact, their response to the question, "What makes a good day for you?" was when they did not get in trouble with a teacher or someone else in the school. Gender differences were apparent in students' recollections of sixth and seventh grade in that boys had more academic struggles, and lower grades, than girls.

The third theme evident was that these students often felt victimized in their school settings. Specifically, both male and female students reported bullying in the middle school. The majority

of the boys interviewed described a clique of boys in the school who harassed many of the girls they felt did not fit in with the rest of the group. One boy indicated in his interview that he felt powerless to stop this clique of boys from harassing females because he would also be ostracized if he defended the females. The female students reported that they often are teased and suggested that they were targeted because of their physical appearance.

The last theme that emerged from the interview responses was that students' parents were not heavily involved in their child's schooling in both sixth and seventh grade. All of the students interviewed did come from families of lower socioeconomic status, which may have made parental involvement difficult because of competing work schedules, limited transportation, or childrearing responsibilities. One of the students had parents who were currently unemployed.

Although these findings mirror many of those discovered by other researchers (e.g., Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Midgely et al, 2002), the nature of how this study was conducted adds ecological validity to previous work. In addition, this study also highlights how a school district responds to adolescents' struggles with the transition between elementary and middle school environments. Specifically, after hearing about these findings in a presentation by the university researchers and students involved in the *Research Methods* course, the school district engaged in this study created and staffed a new position in both middle schools to address the needs of struggling students. These staff members, titled support teachers, help classroom teachers adjust instruction to meet at-risk student needs. In addition, they provide assistance to these students so that they can succeed academically. Other initiatives that were suggested by the research team and that are being implemented by the district include a peer mentoring program, increased staffing in the guidance offices, and improved communication between elementary and middle school teachers. The findings of this study not only contribute to the literature on middle school

transition, they also demonstrate how university researchers and school district personnel can work together to improve educational practice.

In summary, both the survey and interview responses suggest that not all students experience the developmental mismatch discussed by Eccles and her colleagues (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). Our finding that approximately 20% of the students in the district under study report difficulties with the transition is similar to previous suggestions made by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995) that between 25% and 50% of adolescents do not experience this alignment and are at great risk for educational and social difficulties. Based on the in-depth interviews with students-at-risk, it appears that the problems may have more to do with the struggles faced by students who do not have strong academic profiles than with just making a transition at this time in their life. The transition to a new learning environment may compound these students' difficulties, pushing them further behind academically and socially; however, because these students were also struggling in the elementary environment, they most likely would benefit from interventions aimed at both levels of schooling (Midgley, Middleton, Gheen, & Kumar, 2002).

References

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995). *Great transitions: Preparing adolescents for a new century*. New York: Carnegie Corp.

Eccles, J.S., & Midgley, C. (1989). Stage/environment fit: Developmentally appropriate classrooms for early adolescents. In R.E. Ames & C. Ames (Eds.), *Research on motivation in education* (Vol. 3, pp. 139-186). New York: Academic Press.

Eccles, J.S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C.M., Reuman, D. Flanagan, C., & MacIver, D. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage/environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and families. *American Psychologist, 48*, 90-101.

Epstein, J.L. (1995). School/Family/Community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76*, 701-712.

Epstein, J.L. (1996). Perspectives and previews on research and policy for school, family, and community partnerships. In A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Family school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 209-246). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Jackson, A.W., & Davis, G.A. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Midgley, C., Middleton, M.J., Gheen, M.H., & Kumar, R. (2002). Stage-environment fit revisited: A goal theory approach to examining school transitions. In C. Midgley (Ed.), *Goals, goals structures, and patterns of adaptive learning*. (pp. 109-142). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Roeser, R.W., Eccles, J.S., & Sameroff, A.J. (2000). School as a context of early adolescents' academic and social-emotional development" A summary of research findings. *Elementary School Journal, 100*, 443-471.

Appendix A

Individual Student Interview Questions

6th Grade:

1. What school did you attend last year?
2. Did you like your school in 6th grade?
3. How many teachers did you have in 6th grade?
4. Did you like your teacher or teachers in 6th grade? What did you like?
5. Did you 6th grade teacher act like he or she cared about you? What made you think that?
6. Did you have a good friend in your 6th grade class?
7. What made it easy/difficult to make friends in 6th grade?
8. Did you feel like you were really part of the group when you were in 6th grade?
9. Was the schoolwork you had in 6th grade too difficult, too easy or about right? What made it that way?
10. Do you think you tried as hard as you could in 6th grade?
11. What consequences did the 6th grade teacher(s) in 6th grade give you for inappropriate behavior? Can you give examples of your appropriate and in appropriate behaviors?
12. In 6th grade, who was an adult you would talk to if you were upset or worried?
13. Did you feel about the same size as other kids when you were in 6th grade?
14. How comfortable did you feel at your school in 6th grade?

7th grade:

1. Do you like your school in 7th grade?
2. Do you like your teachers in 7th grade?
3. Do your 7th grade teachers act like they care about you? What makes you think so?
4. Do you have a good friend in your 7th grade classes?
5. Describe what makes it easy or hard to make friends in 7th grade?
6. Do you feel like you are really part of a group in 7th grade?
7. How would you describe the way students in middle school treat each other?
8. Is the schoolwork you have in 7th grade too difficult, too easy or about right?
9. Do you think you try as hard as you can in 7th grade?
10. What consequences do the 7th grade teachers give you for inappropriate behavior?
11. In 7th grade, who is an adult you would talk to if you were upset or worried?
12. Do you think the visits to the middle school helped you to become familiar with it? What should be done for 6th graders now?
13. Do your parents participate in any activities at the middle school?
14. Do you feel about the same size as other kids in 7th grade?
15. How do you spend your time after school? Activities at school? When you get home? On weekends?
16. Is there anything you would like to change about yourself? What is it? Why do you want to change it?
17. What are the things you like best about yourself?
18. What makes a good day for you? What makes a bad day for you?
19. How comfortable do you feel at the middle school?

20. What do you think you will do after high school?

21. Is there anything else you would like t tell me about your experience at the middle school?

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

TM035066

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Sharing the Responsibility: A University-School District Investigation of Middle School Transition

Author(s): Sandra Deemer, Suzanne McCotter, & Darcy Smith

Corporate Source: Millersville University

Publication Date: 4/03

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Level 1

☑

Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) *and* paper copy

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

Level 2A

☐

Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2B

Level 2B

☐

Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits.
If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Sign here, → please

Signature: Sandra Deemer	Printed Name/Position/Title: Sandra Deemer, Ph.D / Assistant Professor
Organization/Address: Millersville University, Millersville PA 17551	Telephone: (717)872-3419 / FAX: (717)872-3856
	E-Mail Address: Sandra.deemer@millersville.edu / Date: 6/13/03

(Over)

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, *or*, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:
Address:
Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:
Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
1129 SHRIVER LAB
COLLEGE PARK, MD 20742-5701
ATTN: ACQUISITIONS

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
4483-A Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland 20706

Telephone: 301-552-4200
Toll Free: 800-799-3742
FAX: 301-552-4700
e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov
WWW: http://ericfacility.org

EFF-088 (Rev. 2/2001)